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Gender Inequality in Education: accounting for women's subordination

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ABSTRACT *This article is an attempt to apply a systematic use of theory to gender inequalities in education. It expands on the tenets of liberal, radical, and socialist feminist perspectives to account for differential gender outcomes in terms of educational access, attainment, and field of study choices. The State emerges as a key actor regulating and promoting educational processes and outcomes, and the perspective that most accurately captures the State's practices is socialist feminism. There has been a recent convergence in feminist thought toward the meshing of ideological and material elements in the explanation of women's subordination, bringing closer than ever the radical and socialist feminist perspectives. These perspectives detect severe limits in the State's ability to improve women's conditions while groups outside the State, particularly women-run organizations, are identified as the most likely sources of significant educational change and thus social change, in the interests of women.*

Introduction

For those concerned with the education of women, access to schooling, years of education attained, and fields of study selection represent three basic indicators to assess women's progress. If women are not enrolled in school, if they fail to complete a given cycle of education, and if they study only certain fields, the potential role of education in the transmission of skills and knowledge necessary for the establishment of a reconfigured society becomes moot. Women's access to education, both in terms of the decrease in the rate of illiteracy and in years of schooling attained, has been improving over time. (For a recent discussion of women's educational conditions in the Third World, see Stromquist, 1989b). Compared to their mothers and grandmothers, women today have more education than ever before. The enrollment of women in primary and secondary school has improved in the last 30 years, and women have registered a slightly greater rate of growth than men, as women have increased their average years of schooling 0.5 years more than men did during that period (Horn & Arriagada,

1986). Nonetheless, women continue to evince lower levels of education than men; serious gender disparities still exist in West Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East—regions in which the proportion of women with no education is between 14 and 21 percentage points greater than that of men. While several countries have narrowed the gap between the number of men and the number of women that have access to primary and secondary education, gender equality remains elusive for many countries in the Third World: women's enrollment in primary and secondary education is lower than that of men by at least 10 percentage points in 66 of 108 developing countries and higher in only 8 countries (Sivard, 1985).

The rate of women's illiteracy has been decreasing. On the other hand, women constitute more than half of the world's illiterates and their proportion of the total illiterate population is increasing, having moved from 58% in 1960 to 60% in 1970 to 63% in 1985, according to UNESCO estimates. In several African and Asian countries, the percentages of illiterate women are not only extremely high but the educational gender gap in those regions is an average of 21 percentage points (UNESCO, 1988).

Most countries—developing as well as developed—show considerable gender disparities at the university level. Enrollment rates of women are significantly lower than those of men; further, women tend to concentrate in a handful of disciplines, usually identified as 'feminine' and commanding weak rewards in terms of wages, authority, and social prestige.

Bowman & Anderson remarked several years ago that the rate of educational participation of women is "the least common denominator of worldwide statistics" (1980, p. 12). The situation has improved since then, yet there is still a sizable number of countries that do not collect statistics by sex, particularly at higher levels of education, indicating thereby that they do not consider the improvement of women's education a priority.

Studies of the educational participation and attainment of women reveal that it is the women from low-income social groups and low status ethnic affiliation who register the lowest levels of education. Clearly, although women suffer the consequences of an arbitrary social marker, gender is an attribute whose impact increases or becomes attenuated as it becomes associated with particular social class and ethnic membership.

In observing gender disparities in education, it is clear that we are confronting a phenomenon that affects women across societies and levels of development. Educational access and attainment of women is shaped by cultural and socioeconomic forces, but the magnitude and pattern of these outcomes suggest that class differences and cultural diversity alone do not fully explain why the inequalities of women's education exist and persist. There have been few studies that specifically distinguish inequalities due to gender from those due to class or race. A study by Rosemberg (1985), using census and national household survey data in Brazil, found that within racial groups there was equal educational opportunity between sexes, but the analysis of the association between educational level and income showed that the discrimination by gender was more pronounced than the discrimination by race, indicating thus that the school system perhaps discriminates less against women than the society at large.

In the sociology of education literature, several explanations have been advanced for the phenomenon of educational inequalities. The main focus of these explanations has been on the function of the educational system in serving the

various social classes, particularly the extent to which the school can be considered a fair instrument for enculturation and social mobility. These theories have not dealt specifically with such concrete manifestations of inequality as access to educational services, rates of dropping out, and the number of years of education attained. Nonetheless, they offer formulations that can be extended to these kinds of outcomes.

On the other hand, a number of studies have explicitly addressed gender inequalities in educational access and attainment. These studies have been remarkably atheoretical, usually characterized by the identification of many independent variables but failing to weave them into a cohesive explanatory framework. For instance, Bowman & Anderson, summarizing patterns of educational participation of women in the Third World, conclude:

> Whether schooling of a daughter is deemed worthwhile will be influenced by perceptions (or expectations) of the effects of schooling on jobs, on acquisition of a 'better' husband, on quality of domestic life, on the daughter's personality development, and on the well-being of their children. (1980, p. 12)

Another major synthesis of women's education (Deble, 1980), reporting on the high dropout rates for girls in primary and secondary African schools in the mid-70s, finds that these are due to early marriage, insufficient places in secondary school, coeducation, the cost of education, the low quality of girls' education, and the irrelevance of formal education to economic needs. Numerous reasons then appear to be at work, but the connections among them are not articulated. Many of the studies in this category do not ask why it is that women's education is considered less important than that of men or why it is that the education of women is so pervasively linked by social norms to their role as wives and mothers.

It is the purpose of this paper to discuss the various theories about inequalities of education and to assess their relative merits. First we will examine classical theories regarding social inequalities in education and identify their limitations in dealing with gender inequalities. We will then examine theories that address specifically the existence of gender-based asymmetries and show that these theories differ from classical explanations by bringing into the analysis previously ignored actors, notably the State, who are important in the determination of both social and educational outcomes. The introduction of these new actors is linked to the identification of new concepts about social relationships, concepts that had been taken for granted or assumed to belong only to the world of the 'private'. Several feminist theories will be reviewed not only in terms of their general arguments about the role of education for women, but also in terms of their answers to five questions suggested by empirical findings [1] regarding women's access and attainment in education: (1) Why are there more illiterate women than men in practically all societies? (2) Why do men continue to exhibit higher levels of educational attainment than women? (3) Why are women in a limited number of fields at the university level? (4) Why do more women than men in universities come from wealthy families? and (5) Why is it that women are gaining increasing levels of education throughout most of the world? We raise questions, therefore, that have to do with women's expansion of schooling, with the levels at which this expansion has occurred, with curriculum content regarding gender transformation, and with the interaction between gender and class in educational systems.

Classical Theories

The best known theories about social inequalities in education are those derived from either the functionalist (or consensual) or the conflict (or neo-Marxist) approaches.

The views of Durkheim and Parsons—still widely accepted in academic circles—argue that schooling is meritocratic and that success in it depends primarily on the motivation and the intellectual ability of the individual. Schools sort people out and in the process stratify society, but they do so according to the best method we have yet devised: merit. Durkheim could not yet observe the manifestations that schooling would take in urban/rural residence, ethnicity, and gender. His logic, however, would have explained unequal outcomes as a function of individual (motivational and/or cognitive) differences; the notion of a systematic injustice generated by the formal educational system or by society at large would have had no room in his discussion. Parsons did consider the likely asymmetry between men and women's education, but in his scheme such differences were necessary for the good functioning of society, which required a specialization of labor, with men in aggressive, 'instrumental' roles and women in nurturing, 'expressive' roles in the home. It is clear that he did not conceive that what to him and others might appear as 'complementary functions' were, from the perspective of many women, an oppressive distinction that forced women to domestic arenas.

Another view of social inequality with impact on educational outcomes is represented in the work of Bernstein, who asserts that students bring to school conceptual patterns acquired through socialization in their families. These language and cognitive differences include limited vocabularies and syntactic structures and poor analytical abilities on the part of students from lower social classes and more elaborated, abstract language and thinking abilities on the part of students from more privileged social classes (1974). Bernstein's more recent contributions refer explicitly to gender, but he asserts that gender, ethnicity, and religious categories "speak through class regulated modes" (1982, p. 336). Similar observations about the differential abilities of social classes were made by Elder (1965) and Hess & Shipman (1965) although they do not concentrate on language competencies but on cognitive ability. According to these authors, children's thought patterns and exploration are stimulated in varying degrees by their family socialization practices, particularly by maternal behaviors. Some children have mothers who patiently explain to their children everything they ask and who allow them to learn through exploration of their environment [2]. In contrast, other mothers are incapable of producing explanations for their children and utilize control and discipline over their children's attempt to explore their environment.

Bourdieu's theory of the reproduction of cultural capital complements the above rationales, introducing the notion that schools arbitrarily select certain types of speech, taste, and knowledge as legitimate and that in so doing they reproduce the power of certain social classes [3]. As a group, these theorists identify the more 'capable' children as belonging to the upper- or middle-income families and the less 'capable' children as living in low-income families, but they do not address the question of why schools would tend to promote patterns of speech and cognitive development that favor one class of individuals over

another. In other words, missing in their analyses are the notions of power and its intentional use.

Expanding their arguments to account for social inequalities in education, it could be said that individuals from lower socio-economic origins are likely to experience difficulties adjusting to the more formal and complex setting provided by the school and that in those cases where difficulties are particularly severe, the students will respond by leaving the school without having completed their studies. These theories, however, cannot be used to account for gender differences because they contain nothing in their arguments to explain differences *within* social classes.

The other set of explanations about inequalities in education, those derived from neo-Marxist analysis, identify social classes more explicitly and assert that schools reflect the dominant economic structure in society. The best-known Marxist critique of education, that of Bowles & Gintis (1976), concentrates on the question of differential socialization by the school system into dominant and dominated social classes. Bowles & Gintis contend that the schools teach the children of the wealthy to be managerial and autonomous while they teach low-class students to be subservient and obedient workers (1976, pp. 132–33). In their words:

> Education must teach [the majority of] people to be properly subordinated and render them efficiently fragmented in consciousness to preclude their getting together to shape their own material existence. (p. 130)

While these authors concentrate on the socialization role of the school, their assertions can be extended to questions of participation and attainment as it could be inferred that to the degree the educational system emphasizes the transmission of proper worker attitudes (particularly the acceptance of a lower position in the hierarchy in the process of production), students from lower classes will not be motivated into pursuing higher levels of education and the school will not be especially concerned with making sure that these students complete their education or achieve greater levels of cognitive skills. Bowles & Gintis, however, do consider the phenomenon of school expansion. In the context of US society, they explain school expansion as the capitalists' response to the need to produce the workers that the quickly expanded economy of the nineteenth century demanded. In their view, this expansion did not take place with the objective of improving social mobility; it took place to facilitate the rapid reproduction of the working class.

Bowles and Gintis' main argument, namely that the school gives differential messages to students from different social classes, receives some refinement in the work of Baudelot & Establet (1971), who maintain that the school is not a unitary system but comprises two distinct networks corresponding to the two main social classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The network serving the proletariat not only transmits knowledge that trains students for manual occupations but also consists of schools of poor quality and concomitant poor learning.

The neo-Marxist theories have given much attention to social class as a key determinant and have succeeded in providing important insights about the macro-level functioning of schooling. Unfortunately, they provide explanations that have no room for the existence of gender differentiation within the social

classes. As a group, these theories would predict that individuals from low social classes would tend to attain different types of schooling and fewer years of schooling than their better-off counterparts. But as is the case for functionalist theories, the neo-Marxist explanations of school behavior are gender-blind and unable to explain why inequalities occur within social classes. What neo-Marxist theories do contribute to the understanding of gender inequalities is that determinants of school failure are located not within motivations and abilities of individuals but within process and objectives of institutions in society. The role of structure, thus, appears as a force of significance.

Another contribution of neo-Marxist theories is the identification of the State as a key institution in generating, regulating, and maintaining social relations. One of the main exponents of this line of thought, Offe (1985), maintains that social policy is the State's manner of affecting the lasting transformation of non-wage laborers into wage laborers. For members of society to function as wage laborers, certain basic reproduction functions must be fulfilled in the provision of socialization, health services, education, care for the aged, and so on. These domains, says Offe, "must fall within the province of state policy", in order to ensure ruling class control over who is and who is not a wage laborer (p. 89). Offe, then sees the State as intimately linked to educational processes and objectives. At the same time, he sees the State policies as the reconciliation of 'licensed' demands or recognized needs with the perceived 'exigencies' or tolerance of the capitalist economy for 'unproductive' social expenditures. This would predict that the State will respond to requests for additional education or even different types of education presented by the subordinate classes without, however, making substantial changes in the way education is perceived or rewarded.

The question of educational expansion has received attention by yet another group of theoreticians. Archer, after examining the growth of the educational system in England, finds that the existence of multiple and competing interest groups accounts for the expansion of schooling much better than the notion of a strong social class with a clear and dominant objective (1982). Meyer and associates (1979) maintain that educational expansion is best explained by the diffusion of a global system of citizenship values espoused by the modern state. The values include respect for equality, due process, and political freedom. Archer's explanations do not address gender differences; Meyer and associates do, holding that these will disappear over time as the citizenship rights become more and more accepted.

We noted earlier that gender differences in access and attainments are prevalent throughout the Third World. How can we account for these differences if the dominant theories, using functionalist or conflict, pluralist or global system approaches, do not help us?

Let us first briefly summarize the findings regarding gender and education. It is clearly the case that women have not participated in decision making dealing with the expansion and content of schooling; their progress has been primarily a side effect of the existence of more schools and the school's claim to be a meritocratic system. The various descriptive studies on women's educational access and attainment coincide in distinguishing two main sets of obstacles to women's educational parity: those identified as being 'school-related' and those classifed as 'home-related'. Within the home-related obstacles such variables as parents'

attitudes and aspirations toward their daughters, their socio-economic level, their years in education, the cultural and religious values of their society, and the number of younger siblings in the household have been identified as consistently associated with decisions to enroll females in schools and to allow them to continue their schooling. Within the set of school-related obstacles, the variables identified in the literature are distance to school, presence of female teachers in the classroom, 'relevant' curriculum, presence of counseling facilities, and gender-segregated curricula in schools.

By separating school- from family-related variables, these descriptive studies offer an implicit vision of society in which the school and the family seem to operate independent of each other. Such a vision misses the fact that the State [4], holding an unrivaled monopoly over formal education, is a key institution regulating activities within both the school and the family.

Feminist Theories

In their early manifestations, feminist theories differed considerably in their identification of the factors responsible for the inferior conditions of women in society. Over time there has been a convergence of ideas. At present the three common classifications of feminism into liberal, radical, and socialist are in the process of being superseded by only two categories: the liberal or egalitarian and the feminist approaches (combining radical and socialist feminism); however, in this paper we examine the strengths and weaknesses of the three distinct perspectives [5].

We will first discuss how these theories explain women's inequality in society and then move toward providing specific answers to the questions of women's inequality in educational access and attainment identified earlier in this paper. In doing so, we will be extrapolating from these theories and extending their analyses to account specifically for educational inequalities. These extensions, it must be underscored, are not always based on existing literature but are logical extensions of the assertions being made in the various feminist theories.

The *liberal feminist* perspective is dominated by the sex-role socialization paradigm. This perspective considers that the social system is essentially just and that all deviations from 'desirable' conditions—educational equality included—are due to a lack of information about the problems facing women and lack of adequate legislation to deal with them. Liberal feminism sees the State as an essentially benevolent institution that will both design and implement legislation to ensure women's equal access to education and other social and economic arenas.

The extension of the liberal philosophy to the problems of female literacy would argue, on the one hand, that women have been socialized to have low levels of educational aspirations, and, on the other hand, that the available literacy programs have not been designed taking into account the interests of women or their time constraints. The lower levels of educational attainment by women would also be attributed to traditional socialization messages and sexual discrimination practices in the schools (e.g. sexual stereotypes in textbooks, higher teacher expectations towards boys) that the State has not yet been able to combat successfully. Similarly, the relatively lower participation of women in university education and their concentrated presence in only a few fields would be seen as

the cumulative result of discrimination and socialization of women that trains them to 'fear success' (Horner, 1969) and discourages them from seeking challenging careers. In response to why more wealthy women than wealthy men benefit from tertiary education, liberal feminism might respond by saying that wealthier parents tend to have more education, and, being more educated, tend to be less prejudiced against women and thus more likely to promote and support their daughters' aspirations for advanced schooling. And in reply to why women are gaining more access to education over time, liberal feminism would say that this is a manifestation of the State's ideology of citizenry, an ideology that applies equally to both men and women.

Liberal feminist answers are not totally satisfying because they do not treat the underlying causes of female discrimination. Why is it that men and women are given different socialization messages in the first place? Why do socialization practices persistently discriminate against women rather than men? If discrimination continues to exist, why does the State tolerate it? Ramirez & Weiss (1979) see the State evolving into a benign and progressive macro-institution that is promoting increasingly wider and fairer definitions of 'citizenry' throughout the world. This definition is said now to encompass women as individuals entitled to full rights. According to this benign interpretation of the State, we should see the gradual incorporation of women as the product of modern State ideologies that seek to integrate new categories of individuals into its polity. Ramirez & Weiss (1979), who conducted an investigation covering between 38 and 61 countries and using multiple regression analysis, concluded that higher levels of State authority resulted in greater participation of women in secondary education, but in fact the standardized regression coefficients for these effects were weak (the highest value being .10) and no effects could be found regarding the participation of women in tertiary education (pp. 244–246; primary education enrollment was not examined).

The interpretation of the State as a benevolent actor, cannot, for a variety of reasons, be taken very far: (a) It does not distinguish between symbolic and substantial acts by the State (e.g. not every constitutional right or government policy is in fact implemented). A report on the education of women in Asia and the Pacific notes that the constitutions of all countries in the region "enshrine" the principle of equal educational opportunity and that national development plans have even reflected concern regarding the disadvantaged status of girls but that "with exception of China, no policy has directly attempted to counter sociocultural barriers by conscientizing and mobilizing the community on a sufficiently large scale to make a tangible impact on community attendance and participation" (APEID, 1986, p. 26). Analysis of legislation to promote gender equality and equity in education in the United States shows the modest actual improvement of women in the educational arena and the enormous symbolic gains associated with such legislation (Stromquist, 1989c). Similar studies of legislative policies in England and Australia also indicate mild success via State measures (Deem, 1981; Yates, 1989; Porter, 1983); (b) It ignores material causes that might be leading the State and other institutions in society to discriminate against women; i.e. why are some States more progressive than others, or, conversely, why have some States achieved so little for women?; (c) Most damaging of all, it explains some changes in the gender-role definitions as a product of State actions rather than the consequence of the mobilization and demands of

feminist groups; so even the liberation of women is paternalistically interpreted: it is the result of something given to them and not the fruit of their own efforts. In short, explanations that say that the State is now doing its best to improve the conditions of women are suspect because they are overly optimistic and underestimate the fact that serious changes in the conditions of women cannot derive easily from the institution that has traditionally permitted the subordination and oppression of women.

The second well-known feminist perspective, *radical feminism*, considers that the main cause of women's subordination originates from power relations based on sexual differences (mainly the women's ability to conceive and give birth). On the basis of women's biological reproduction features that set women apart as mothers, an ideological system is constructed around the notions of sexuality and motherhood. This system—known as patriarchy—defines men as superior to women and is defended and maintained through an intricate web of values, norms, laws and institutions [6].

The radical feminist perspective would see the State as a key agent in the perpetuation of women's subordination via its strong defense of the family as the core unit of society. This perspective would argue that the family, as currently defined, acts as the main locus for the production of the sexual division of labor. The defense of the family by the State, then, is associated with the identification of women as mothers and housekeepers, thus creating an artificial but overwhelming 'private' realm for women and a 'public' world for men. To the extent that the State needs the family to play a specific mission, and given that women have a particular role in the family, it would follow that it would be very unlikely for the State to initiate a process in which women's conditions could change substantially.

Expanding the radical feminist perspective to education, the higher levels of illiteracy among women would be explained as resulting from the State's reliance on women for biological reproductive tasks which require only a minimum of skills and knowledge, many times transmitted through informal or nonformal education. In countries with low levels of industrial development, motherhood is construed (socially although not officially) as not even requiring literacy. Household tasks require knowledge and organizational skills; they are not 'dumb' tasks, yet they can be acquired through oral, informal methods. In countries that have almost exclusive motherhood roles for women, Pakistan being a case in point, the result is that there are extremely high rates of illiteracy among women and a high dropout rate after primary schooling. Regarding the fact that women attain fewer years of education than men, the radical feminist perspective would say that women do not receive priority from the State because, having assigned women the reproductive tasks, the State will concentrate on improving first the education of men. Besides, since men have been assigned predominance in the 'public' sphere and this sphere relies on educational credentials for many transactions, it is more important to ensure men's education first. The concentration of women in a few 'traditionally female' fields at the university level (whether by choice or due to lack of alternatives) would be explained in terms of the influence of the patriarchal system that inculcates upon women the value of domestic responsibilities, with the consequence that they choose careers that tend to be extensions of domestic roles or that will not conflict with them.

The radical perspective would not offer a clear explanation for the higher presence of wealthier as opposed to low-income at the university level. And this is a weakness of this perspective, because it downplays material conditions while defining the gender problem solely on the basis of ideological determinants. Moreover, radical feminism cannot offer a clear explanation of why women are improving their levels of education over time; it does not identify the conditions under which patriarchy would tend to relax its reins.

The discussion we have just presented represents the original version of radical feminism. As will be seen later, this version has progressively shown greater attention to material conditions that support the exploitation of women.

The third feminist perspective, *socialist feminism*, would see an interconnection between ideological and economic forces, in which patriarchy and capitalism reinforce each other. This perspective would also call attention to the family and see it as a source of oppression, but an oppression that is constantly reinforced by conditions in the labor market. The State would be seen as intimately linked to the mode of production and thus (a) unlikely to alter the position of classes or other groups in the economic sphere, and (b) likely to favor capitalists and entrepreneurs over workers regardless of gender. Since women represent both part of the reserve labor force and an inexpensive way to reproduce (physically and socially) the labor force, the State acts jointly and closely with economic interests to keep women in a subordinate position. As a result, changes in the role of women, independent of changes in both the mode of production and patriarchal structures, would be insignificant.

Socialist feminist analyses of education hold the school as a site for the reproduction of women's oppression as workers and as women. As workers, they are needed for the maintenance of an inexpensive labor force; as women, they are indoctrinated to accept the sexual division of labor that assigns women motherhood and domestic roles (Wolpe, 1978; Deem, 1978; Kelly & Nihlen, 1982; Arnot, 1984).

Other analysts, not all of whom use the socialist feminist label, have observed that gender inequalities in education are not a function of merely lacking attributes and resources needed for educational success but primarily the expression of conflicting economic interests in society (Yates, 1986; Weiner, 1986). Some have brought to the fore the importance of the State in determining gender conditions, even though the evidence derives mostly from industrialized countries. One such writer is David (1980), who has examined the articulation among the State, education, and the family. She argues that the school has replaced the church as the institution that links with the family in the maintenance of domestic and social relations. She asserts that the system of universal and compulsory education was accompanied by the State's attribution of responsibility to parents, particularly mothers, for the conditions of their children's education and health. David also observes that the school curriculum and the large number of primary school teachers in motherly roles behave as forces that reproduce the sexual division of labor. MacDonald (1980), similarly, conceptualizes the schools as settings that transmit gender codes with strong boundaries for 'femininity' and 'masculinity'. In her view, these codes are likely tied to the production process and, if so, the role of the State in regulating them is quite salient. Deem's research (1981) documents how State educational policies have clearly reflected gender ideologies while welcoming the incorporation of women to meet the needs

of capitalist production. The critical role of the State is perhaps most cogently underscored by Connell, who goes as far as stating that:

> The state is itself a reorganization of gender relations, particularly the structure of gender power. The sexual division of labor is implicated in the production processes that generate the surplus of goods and services which makes urban populations possible. It is important to know to what extent the surplus is appopriated through sexual politics and on gender lines, and to what extent the increased specialization of workers is a gendered one. (1987, p. 152)

Extending the socialist feminist perspective to account for the existence and persistence of gender inequalities in access to and attainment in schooling, the following explanations can be derived: The large number of illiterate women in the world can be attributed to women's double role as reproducers of children and guardians of the family, and as workers in a segregated labor force that absorbs many women in the informal sector of the economy, which requires little formal education. The time of low-income women is generally taken by domestic and poorly remunerated work; these women are not available for schooling, especially in societies where the economy relies heavily on subsistence production. The fact that women have lower levels of education than men would be understood in terms of women's devalued role as workers, which concentrates women in only a few occupational positions and places many poor women in the informal sector of the economy which requires either no education or low levels of education.

Women's presence in sex-segregated fields at the university would be attributed to (1) the social definition of women as primarily mothers and hence responsible first and foremost for the welfare of their families, and (2) the labor market conditions that in fact offer women fewer and weaker rewards than those offered to men and thus make it more profitable for parents to invest in sons than in daughters. The presence of more wealthy women than wealthy men at the university level would be explained by socialist feminism as the reflection that gender and class intersect with each other: middle- and upper-class parents can invest more in daughters because at higher levels of income, the education of daughters represents a more affordable investment; moreover, the education of these daughters is also probably a more certain investment because these women are likely to have more freedom to join the labor market and stay in it longer because their better economic conditions allow them to cope with domestic demands (e.g. child care, cooking, and cleaning tasks are usually handled through the use of maids in developing countries).

In reply to why more women are gaining access to education (albeit very slowly) all over the world, the socialist feminist perspective would argue that as countries become more industrially advanced, labor becomes less predicated on physical strength and thus education is needed by employers to discriminate among workers and by the workers themselves to become more competitive *vis-à-vis* other workers. However, it must be noted that the new technologies emphasizing the segmented production of consumer goods such as televisions, computers, and garments, need intensive labor in the manufacturing of these products. To produce these 'global-assembly line' goods, employers need obedient and unassuming workers—which makes women a prime target. Here, the new technologies

are serving to recreate a gender-based division of labor by invoking sexual stereotypes such as 'manual dexterity' and 'patience' to hire women to work in assembly work. For women of lower social classes, educational prospects would not be very good because modest levels of education would be sufficient to find jobs in industrial production. But for women of all classes, the new technologies open new possibilities. As women can fill more positions in the labor force, this creates in turn a greater female demand for education.

From the socialist feminist perspective, there is a basic contradiction between patriarchy and the level of technology. Patriarchy would tend to keep women in the home; technology would tend to incorporate women in new capacities, especially if their labor tends to be inexpensive. At the professional level, occupations based on sophisticated technologies, being new, would be less subject to gender stereotypes, and this would make it easier for female university students to enter emerging fields. Therefore, through new technologies, a new space of social change becomes available for women, albeit limited to those in middle- and upper-social classes. Yet, it is by no means clear that technology will contribute to an eventual equality of women's schooling; industrialization may develop new spacial arrangements which make large urban centers especially oppressive to low-income women (Harman, 1983). Access and attainment may even out for men and women over time, but inequalities in field of study selection will probably continue to preserve man's advantage in economic and social arenas.

In Search of the Best Theoretical Fit

Classical theories are unable to explain gender differences inasmuch as they ignore them and concentrate exclusively on social class differences. In contrast, as has been seen above, all three feminist theories are able to provide explanations accounting for women's lower rates of educational access and attainment. The critical question now becomes, which is the most appropriate theory, the one that best accounts for the outcomes that can be observed?

The literature on school participation and attainment by girls in developing countries shows that family decisions are powerful determinants of the probability that daughters will enroll, attend, and continue in school. It has been observed that parents assign girls more domestic responsibilities than they give to boys. In the case of poor households, girls represent important labor that the family cannot afford to forego by allowing them to go to school. Thus, even if schools are available and girls enroll, patterns of girls' poor attendance leading to dropping out tend to emerge. In the case of girls from better-off families, parents are able to afford their daughters' presence in school, but norms about the appropriate role of women (i.e. being married and having children) discourage parents from investing significantly in the education of their daughters. Women who reach the university level are not only few but, in comparison with their male counterparts, tend to belong disproportionately to middle- and upper-social classes.

In making sense of these patterns, a liberal interpretation would be to consider them purely as cultural manifestations that the State will correct through effective 'educational policies'. But both radical and socialist feminist perspectives alert us to the fact that it may not be in the State's best interest to modify the status quo

dramatically. These perspectives also alert us to the prospect that 'educational' policies independent of new family and labor policies will not work.

If we look for reasons for which the State would want to respect the gender status quo, it is clear that the belief that women are inferior to men could not persist independent of some reason that makes this belief a good choice. If this belief were simply anchored in a non-material cultural tradition, we would expect to see a great deal of variability in the status of women across the societies and across time presumably discrimination criteria themselves would depend on fads and thus be unstable. And yet, we find a remarkable consistency in the identification of women as inferior. To be sure, women in most societies are not slaves and many lead satisfying lives. However, were we to compare the range of career, occupation, and life options open to women and men as groups, in the final analysis men would emerge as the privileged group. Women do receive lower salaries in the public world and they can fulfill more duties at home precisely because they are less competitive than men in the outside world. The ideology of women's inferiority develops its own dynamics and becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as women are also assigned inferior economic roles. The economic/ ideological connection is there and it is evident that a theory of women's conditions must take both forces into account.

An important trend that merits additional discussion is the increasing access of women to education. Why is the State allowing it? At least three reasons can be identified, all of them compatible with the socialist feminist perspective. The first has to do with changes in technology which have eased, though not eliminated women's domestic chores in many countries and which have rendered industrial and service work less dependant on physical strength. The increasing incorporation of women in the labor force would prompt women to acquire greater levels of education in order to increase their competitiveness *vis-à-vis* others in the labor pool. In fact, because of the existing ideologies about women's inferiority, women would have to obtain more education and competence than men in order to compete on equal footing. Although not socialist feminists, Wright & Martin also notice the impact of technology on the way societies constitute themselves. They say:

> Concrete class structures are always complex amalgams of multiple, different relations of exploitation. Capitalist societies cannot be analyzed concretely as simple embodiments of the abstract capitalist mode of production; they are always complex combinations of a variety of mechanism of exploitation and accompanying forms of class relations. In order to predict the structures, therefore, one has to understand the effects of technical change on each of these forms of class relations in the class structure as a whole, not simply on capitalist class relations. (1987, p. 24)

Note that the greater participation of women in the labor force need not be construed as one which would take place under conditions of sexual equality. Economic forces would use the State to regulate gender relations to their satisfactions; the tie between gender and the State would continue but under new forms made necessary and possible by the new technologies.

A second reason derives from the dialectics between the State's official value of equality of citizens and the popular belief that education serves social and economic mobility. Equality is becoming an increasingly explicit norm in national

official statements of education. According to an analysis by Fiala & Gordon (1987), reference to equality norms (which one presupposes includes gender equality) expressed by over 130 countries increased from 12% in 1955 to 23% in 1965. Given the strength and wide diffusion of these norms, the State today in most countries would find it very difficult to discriminate openly against women; thus women find in schooling a space worth utilizing. The expansion of schooling, within this reason, could be explained as an instance of what Offe calls the "compatibility problem", or the State's need to react consistently to the two poles of needs of labor and capital (1985, p. 95)[7]. On the other hand, since these poles do not carry equal force, it is likely that ceilings to women's education (more probably in field selection at the university level and in remuneration for levels and types of education) would not disappear.

A third reason for the State's willingness to permit the incorporation of greater numbers of women in the educational system has to do with the content of schooling. The school system does not offer knowledge that challenges the sexual division of labor or gender ideologies. There is evidence indicating that: (a) many school textbooks in developing countries contain negative messages for female identity (see the review by Stromquist, 1989a); (b) often teachers consciously or unconsciously discriminate in favor of boys; and (c) the school experience affects the career aspirations of boys but leaves unmodified the aspirations of girls (Deem, 1980; Kelly & Elliott, 1982). In very few instances (Mexico being one of them) has the State taken steps to remove sexual stereotypes from textbooks. Little training has occurred (even in wealthy countries such as the United States) to provide teachers with new strategies to combat gender discrimination in teaching practices. Few measures have been taken to modify organizational structures and occupational patterns that persistently place women in low positions in school settings. This being the case, the expansion of schooling does not have to be equated with the questioning of gender ideologies. Hence, the State can engage in the expansion of women's schooling as a relatively harmless extension of human rights.

Conclusion

Classical theories about inequalities in education are gender-blind and thus of limited usefulness in explaining the persistent disadvantages of women's education. These theories take social class as the main variable of interest and fail to deal with gender as a major social construct. Feminist perspectives coincide in considering women as the main referent, but they vary considerably in the role they attribute to the State, the family, and the school system in the process of change to attain women's equality.

The State is far from being a homogeneous creation; it manifests significant differences across countries. And yet, it is becoming increasingly clear that the State, regardless of political philosophy—planned economy or free market, democratic or authoritarian, religious or secular—faces definite limits in providing an education that is truly liberating for women.

Surprisingly, limited efforts have taken place to unmask the nature of the State's management of the educational system. As David accurately notes:

> Neither feminists nor liberals have argued strongly for changes in the

> relationship between the privacy of the family and public life, whether work or school. Most have argued merely that the welfare state did not go far enough in providing equal opportunities. (1986, p. 36)

But, on the positive side, it must be observed that there is an increasing tendency for radical and socialist feminist analyses to mesh, a tendency observable today in industrialized countries and earlier in developing countries, particularly Latin America.

Both radical and socialist feminist perspectives would predict that the deepest transformations of education to serve the needs of women will not emerge within the formal education system, which is monopolized by the State. The most creative and promising instances of contestatory education for women, in fact, are coming from women's groups outside the formal education arena. Although they are small in number and have access to limited resources, these groups have introduced into the 'educational' discussion, issues such as domestic violence, authoritarianism in the family, abortion, motherhood as an ideology, and unequal pay—elements which bring into the open the existence of gender ideologies. It is likely that here reside the main forces for educational change, that as these groups of women become more organized they will both develop among women (and men) a much greater understanding of sexual oppression and subordination in society and place increasing pressure on the State to respond to the needs of women for a transformed society.

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NOTES

[1] These findings are drawn from a review of approximately 80 empirical studies dealing with the determinants of participation and attainment of women in developing countries (Stromquist, 1989a).

[2] These arguments are quite similar to those first advanced by Hagen (1963) in explaining why certain nations developed more rapidly than others. Hagen traces the emergence of the "uncreative personality"—the persons who shy away from experimentation and innovations—to parental socialization practices that do not allow for the children's initiative and persistently give them arbitrary instructions to guide their behaviors.

[3] A massive project involving 10,000 men in England and Wales found that the expansion of schooling did not necessarily lead to social equality in terms of access of secondary schooling. It also found little support for Bourdieu's notion that schools reproduce the cultural capital—some support was found in the selection of type of school but not in school-leaving age or in examination success (Halsey *et al.*, 1980).

[4] This paper treats the State as a generic concept, meaning the set of institutions having powers of coercion and persuasion over the citizens. Although there are different types of States depending on their link with the polity, e.g. the corporatist state, the contract-based, the dependent, the totalitarian, etc., there is significant evidence—beyond the scope of this paper to review—indicating that these differences have a rather marginal impact on the condition of women in society.

[5] Both classical and feminist theories have emerged in advanced industrialized countries and thus refer to events and conditions in those societies. Their application to Third World countries must be done with caution. In several respects, however, the differences in gender ideologies between industrialized and developing countries seem one of degree, not nature. The identification of three feminist theories is based on Jaggar (1983); her book presents a detailed discussion of these perspectives and their main exponents. Acker, in an article first published in 1987, also applies

these three feminist theories to education, emphasizing the typical educational objectives of these theories and their strategies for change.

[6] Although generally known as patriarchy, this ideology can assume an extreme form as in machismo, whereby men consider women basically as sex objects and see no reason to take care of their offspring, or the somewhat milder form of patriarchy, whereby men adopt the position of 'breadwinners' and assign women the role of keeping children and house for them.

[7] But although more women would be admitted into higher levels of education, gender imbalances would persist. This is, for instance, the case in the United States where, "the situation of women in graduate education is underenrollment, great attrition when enrolled . . ., and lower probability of receiving a doctorate after obtaining a master's degree" (Feldman, 1974, p. 19).

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